The Changing Times

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President Nixon and his chief defense counsel, Charles Alan Wright, have not always displayed a similarity of views on the larger legal questions of the day. For example, each reviewed the book "Witness" by Whittaker Chambers in The Saturday Review of May 24, 1952. Their opinions were at opposite poles.

By Richard M. Nixon

It is regrettable that appraisal of "Witness" will in too many cases be determined not on the basis of its literary merit but according to the bias each reader may have on the Hiss-Chambers controversy.

I can hear now the epithets which will be directed against it in the drawing rooms, around the dinner tables, and during the cocktail hours among the "better people"—"too emotional," "long and repetitious," "one of those anti-Communist things." After all, "how could anything good come from that fat, repulsive little creature who said those terrible things about a 100 per cent certified gentleman, Alger Hiss?"

But recognizing that mine will probably be a minority view and one that will be subject to the charge of prejudice, I say that "Witness" is a great book, and that the verdict of history will find it so.

It is an amazingly accurate account of what happened during the Congressional "red herring" investigation of the Hiss Case.

It is a moving and stirring story of a dramatic conflict between two powerful and determined personalities—Hiss and Chambers.

It sheds a withering light on the netherworld of deceit, subversion, and espionage which is the Communist conspiracy.

If it did only these things "Witness" would be a significant book. But its greatness is derived from the fact that it answers the great question presented by the Hiss Case—Why? For five years I have been bombarded by that question all over the country: Why did Hiss do it?

How often have I heard my friends in the business and professional world give their own superficial answers to these questions: he must have done it for money; he did it for power; he lied to protect someone else; anyone who becomes a Communist must have been queer and unstable to begin with.

Never can they bring themselves to admit the truth—that Hiss did what he did because he was a Communist, and that despite his background he became convinced that the Communist ideology offered a better solution to the problems which face our civilization than our own system. Once he became convinced that this was the case he was willing to do anything, engage in espionage, run the risk of disgrace for himself and his family, in order to impose the Communist tyranny upon us.

It is here that Chambers renders his greatest service. "Witness" is the first book of its kind which acknowledges the great hold of Communism on the human mind—which does not dismiss it as a cellar conspiracy which can be abolished by police methods. Communism is evil because it denies God and defies man.

This, then, is the lesson for us—that men become Communists out of the best of motives and some of them cease to be Communists for the same motives once they learn that those who accept the pernicious doctrine of the end justifying the means will inevitably find that the means become the end.

And "Witness" goes further. He pleads eloquently and effectively for a counter-faith to combat the Communist idea—a faith based not on materialism but on a recognition of God.

There is much more that I would like to say about the book, but would not want to end this comment without saying a word about the author. I know Whittaker Chambers well. During the early months of the investigation I had the same doubts about his story that many have even today. I felt it was essential to resolve those doubts before going forward with the investigation because to allow a fraud to be perpetrated upon the Committee would not only be a great wrong to Hiss and the others named by Chambers but it would be a death blow to effective and necessary investigation of the Communist conspiracy in the United States.

By Charles Alan Wright

In the minds of most people, all doubt as to the innocence or guilt of Alger Hiss came to an end when the jury in the second Hiss trial brought in a verdict of guilty. The public and much of the press, taking it as an article of faith that the jury verdict represents ultimate immutable Truth, have combined to ridicule those in whose minds there still remains doubt, and to pillory those who refuse to

turn their backs on Alger Hiss.

I do not share this blind faith in juries. I think Hiss is innocent. And I am sure that if the verdict was right and he is guilty, it is the purest chance that the jury guessed the correct answer. A good way to see how the jury could go astray is to compare the trial record with accounts written at the time by top newspaper reporters. Time and again such accounts show that these men failed to understand important testimony. If with all their training the reporters couldn't grasp intricate evidence, how could the untrained jurors be expected to do better?

One of the most fundamental problems in a case of this sort is that, for all our fine legal doctrine to the contrary, in fact the burden of proof was on Hiss to prove his innocence, rather than on the Government to prove him guilty. Further, we seem deliberately to make it as difficult as possible for a jury to reach a rational verdict. We forbid taking notes by jurors, we deny them a copy of the trial record when they enter upon their deliberations. But perhaps these hobbles placed on the jury should come as no surprise in a society which takes pride in the image of Justice wearing a blindfold.

After reading this book, I am convinced that Mr. Chambers is the author of one of the longest works of fiction of the year. The tip-off about the book is that it is too persuasive—on close examination it becomes obvious that the author is not a detached teller of truth but rather a pitchman seeking to put across a bill of goods.

It is a too-well-scrubbed Chambers who is depicted here. Many of the lies, eccentricities, and immoralities in his past are forgotten, which hardly fits in with the air of complete candor the book tries so hard to convey. At the same time his "enemies"—i.e., anyone who doesn't believe his story—are pictured as either snobs or Communists. Mr. Chambers does give in this book a very moving and heartening account of his return to religion, and of the comfort he has found in his new faith. Perhaps, then, he will not take amiss the suggestion that he would do well to study the Ninth Commandment: "Thou shalt not bear false witness."